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Layover to freedom

Some experts say Gander, Newfoundland, may be the best spot in the world for a Cuban, Iranian, or East German to defect. Refugees add that among disgruntled Eastern-bloc citizens, the tiny burg is becoming one of the best-known towns of North America. BY MARK MURO

THE FIRST THING YOU NOTICE IS the smell of spruce, how high it is in the darkness, how clean and cool as you shuffle downstairs to the tarmac. After that, there is the unbelievable silence. After that, there is the plane.

It is a Soviet plane.

All lit up in the northern midnight, the huge jet, an IL-62 passenger plane, gleams cool and monstrous there on the concrete, like some alien spaceship. "CCCP-65448" reads the tail marking, and above that the hammer and sickle lie silent on a red rectangle. There is everywhere an air of incident to the scene. A doleful yellow light flashes silently on the plane's aluminum belly, and under the wings and around the fuselage, trucks and jeeps with red lights and blue lights stand by or deliver unknown messages. A police car stands guard as tiny dark figures stream toward stairs. Uniformed men look on with walkie-talkies. Everything feels familiar, from tense segments of the nightly news.

Yet if there is tension there is no crisis.

Though only an hour earlier a Cuban factory worker defected from this Aeroflot jet and hid under an airport ticket counter for a new life, the event is only a little less odd than the fact that the plane stands in the oceanic Newfoundland dark in the first place.

For here at Gander International Airport, where the security fence serves

doubly to keep in Russians and keep out moose, East meets West in a way unlike anywhere else. For not only does this isolated encampment of aluminum hangars and patchy town on the eastern margin of Canada serve as a crucial control point for all transatlantic air traffic, even more surprising, it routinely offers itself as the sole North American fuel stop on the Moscow-to-Havana jet run. And because of that, a visitor to the airport's international lounge cannot miss the lingering odor of strange Eastern cigarettes and the legend "Moscow" beneath one of the four big clocks on the wall. More intriguing yet, he cannot fail to note that the place has become one of the world's

most frequented jumping-off points for people seeking to flee the communist bloc for the West. The result is that Gander is perhaps the most isolated town in North America where one can watch two Cubans cruise the shopping mall and three Iranians try the Pioneer Room steak.

"I do what I have to do, and I do it here," says the Cuban factory worker not 36 hours after his defection. "It's good here."

The reason, of course, is the rare opportunity provided by what some

observers have lately begun calling "the Gander connection."

Each week, the big Ilyushin jets of the communist bloc — Aeroflot liners from Russia, Interflug from East Germany, Cubana from Cuba — make some 23 stops here to refuel, roughly five jet hours from Havana and eight or nine from Moscow, on trips between Eastern Europe and Cuba. Soviet doctors, Iranian students, Cuban factory workers — whoever gets to fly communist gets to fly here, and when they do, they have a chance they hardly ever have. After a stroll across the Canadian tarmac to the international lounge, no papers necessary, they can make a phone call and buy an American candy bar — or tell a Mountie they want to defect. Others — the desperate ones — flat-out run for it, stand on the bathroom toilet seats, hide somewhere.

When they do, they bring perhaps the most critical moment of their lives to a tiny town of sheet metal set silently in pure distance.

But consider this: Such moments rarely go for naught. Whatever his stratagem, each would-be Canadian, provided he makes clear his desire to stay, has a fine chance of staying. First, he is duly apprehended as an illegal entrant by the

Gander